

# eat & drink

Canele at Cellar Door Provisions  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Are they crazy? As I read about Cellar Door Provisions, the almost 2-year-old Logan

Square breakfast and lunch spot, and interviewed its owners Tony Bezsylo and Ethan Pikas (the two met while separately procuring ingredients at the Dill Pickle Co-Op to bake recipes out of the “Tartine” cookbook), that’s what I keep asking myself.

I have to do so because when you examine the fastidious way they bake pastries, breads and cookies, it seems like madness. Take their canele (\$3, pronounced can-oh-lay—not can-nell—the way I, an idiot in the ways of pastry, was pronouncing it), a fluted jiggly French egg-custard cake. In theory, you could mix up some batter with grocery store eggs and all-purpose flour, throw it in a silicon mold, pop it in the oven and soak it with Bacardi rum.

But the Cellar Door guys mix their batter with local farm eggs and Midwestern-sourced flours. They infuse the batter with bay leaf and then let it sit at least overnight, and sometimes up to seven days, to rest. They create a mixture of butter and beeswax and paint individual expensive copper molds with the formula and let the molds sit in the fridge overnight. They pour the batter into the molds and bake it low and slow for an hour, and then infuse the cooked cakes with Koval single-barrel whiskey. This effort leads to a deep mahogany-colored, crispy, crusted exterior and a bubbly, custardy interior that is reminiscent of a slightly wetter old-school French éclair. The canele wafts with spice and whiskey notes and is quite frankly one of the best pastries I have had in Chicago, ever.

Their bread baking process is even longer and more exhaustive. I’m not going to go into too much detail, but Google it and you’ll find a great behind-the-scenes documentation of the process from my friend Nick Kindelsperger over at [seriouseats.com](http://seriouseats.com). That being said, the process takes multiple days. Loaves (\$3 for two hefty slices plus butter) are cooked in individual cast-iron pans in the oven. The dough is crafted with a 2-year-old yeast starter that Pikas created when the restaurant opened. Amish bakers from 100 years ago would be impressed with the technique and dedication happening here.

I took a friend of mine—a particularly finicky eater who only eats food that is white, slightly beige or from the cheese

## the essentials

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME

**CELLAR DOOR PROVISIONS**

3025 W. Diversey Ave. 773-697-8337

**Looks like:** Lots of white paint, lots of blonde and reclaimed wood, aka heaven as imagined by the hippest of Chicagoans.**Sounds like:** Logan Square regulars sharing the highlights of their week with the restaurant staff.**Smells like:** Butter, freshly baked pastries and Metric Coffee Co. pours.

family—with me to Cellar Door. He took one bite of the slightly tangy, bark-crusted, wheat-riddled sourdough slice and said, “What the heck is this?” and shoved the whole thing in his mouth. He also scooped most of the butter served with it straight into his gullet, savoring it for a minute, before asking why it was so good. It’s because that butter is also churned in-house from fresh Kilgus Farmstead cream and topped with a sprinkle of Jacobsen Salt Co. salt from Oregon.

The Cellar Door quiche (\$9), featuring light garlic notes and a side salad of local greens, is quite possibly the closest you will ever get to eating a cloud. Most quiches you’ll encounter elsewhere are dense casseroles imprisoned in oily cardboard crusts. Cellar Door’s quiche, which feels like it’s held together with nothing more than the tears of a baker, is so light that I worry a whisper would make it collapse. It weeps cream, and the crust cleaves at my fork into mica-like sheets. As those sheets hit my tongue and the crust dissolves, the process feels ceremonial, almost religious.

The menu, handwritten on brown paper near the cash register, changes daily. One evanescent dish I tried called peppers and potatoes (\$12) featured frilly torn bits of kale from Three Sisters Garden in Kankakee, Ill., crisp fingerling potatoes and house-pickled peppers served on a rusty bed of smoky, creamy romesco sauce nestled alongside a gloriously runny poached egg.

Romesco is a Spanish sauce often made of pepper, onion and almonds or hazelnuts. Because the Cellar Door guys are trying to use as many local ingredients as possible, they subbed in pecans from Three Sisters. That excellent smokiness, however, came from a non-local ingredient: shaved bonito, flaky fish fillet shavings usually added to miso broth at Japanese restaurants.

The dining room, mostly white and filled with several small tables and one large communal table, has a calming effect. The place is filled with regulars, and they all seem to want to talk Bezsyenko’s ear off about their dogs, last week’s pastries or whatever. Though the line backs up a little mid-morning, Bezsyenko engages like a very good therapist, listening to every single word and refusing to rush any single conversation just to ring someone else up.

**Bread & butter at Cellar Door Provisions****Thyme and roasted garlic quiche**

Food culture abuses words like “local,” “community” and “artisanal.” Places that buy a few tomatoes at Green City Market and get the rest of their produce from a big-food conglomerate often say they’re local. People get weary when you tell them that a place is dedicated to craft or sustainability. And I worry that by what I’ve written above, people will think, “Oh, just another ‘craft’ place.” But Cellar Door is dedicated in a way that few are. So many of the restaurants or special places in the city that worked like this, such as Andersonville’s now-defunct Great Lake or

Pasticceria Natalina, have disappeared. Of the still-open places in Chicago, Baker Miller is one of the few spots that comes to mind as having a similar seriousness and purpose. Bezsyenko, Pikas and their founding cook Justin Behlke have a commitment to their craft, ingredient procurement and technique that you’re more likely to find at Michelin-starred places like Acadia or Grace than a humble neighborhood spot. The cooks at Cellar Door put in very long hours to keep the business humming.

And so I return to that question: Are they crazy? “Yes, we may be crazy. Although,

honestly it comes down to monetary limitations,” Pikas said. “We can’t afford a proper bread oven right now, so we have to compensate with these techniques. We respect older processes that take a lot of time because we know that results in a more enjoyable product and greater flavor. We wouldn’t want to do it any other way. Shortcuts would bum us out.”

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